

JAMAICA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the freedom to worship and to change one's religion. It prohibits discrimination based on belief. A colonial-era law criminalizing the practices of Obeah and Myalism remains in effect but is not enforced.

The Office of the Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) declined to file charges against a police officer accused in 2021 of cutting a Rastafarian woman's locs (also called "dreadlocks") while in custody. Rastafarian groups protested the ruling, and the Office of the Public Defender recommended the government compensate the woman for violation of her constitutional rights. The government continued compensating individuals from a trust fund it established in 2017 for victims of the 1963 Coral Gardens incident, in which eight persons were killed and hundreds injured in clashes between a Rastafarian farming community and security forces.

In October, several students were reported to have fallen to the ground while speaking in tongues during a devotional service at a high school, prompting increased government and media scrutiny of the role of religion in schools. Rastafarians continued to report discrimination, while also saying there was increasing societal acceptance and respect for their practices. Local media outlets continued to provide a forum for religious dialogue open to participants from all religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials engaged with officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, the Ministry of National Security, the Jamaican Constabulary Forces (JCF), and the Jamaican Defense Force (JDF) to discuss religious freedom issues, including the rights and treatment of religious minorities and other minority groups that faced discrimination from religious institutions. The Ambassador incorporated religious groups into discussions on broad social topics such as gender relations and community violence. Embassy officials also met with leaders of religious groups to discuss the importance of religious tolerance, social inclusion, and freedom of expression in relation to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (midyear 2022). According to the most recent available data (2011 census), 26 percent of the population belong to various branches of the Church of God; 12 percent Seventh-day Adventist; 11 percent Pentecostal; 7 percent Baptist; 3 percent Anglican; 2 percent Roman Catholic; 2 percent United Church of Christ; 2 percent Jehovah's Witnesses; 2 percent Methodist; 1 percent Revivalist; and 1 percent Rastafarian; 2 percent maintain some other form of spiritual practice. Other religious groups in total constitute 8 percent of the population, including approximately 23,000 members of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 18,000 Moravians, 6,500 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1,800 Hindus, 1,500 Muslims (Muslim groups, however, estimate their numbers at 6,500), 500 Jews, and 270 Baha'is. The census reports 21 percent have no religious affiliation. There is no census data on adherents of Yahweh, Sikhism, Jainism, or Obeah and Myalism, religious practices with West African influences, although these practices are reportedly more common in rural villages.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of thought and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, both in public and in private, and to manifest and propagate one's religion or belief in worship. It prohibits discrimination based on belief. The constitution provides that rights and freedoms are protected to the extent they do not "prejudice the rights and freedoms of others."

A colonial-era law criminalizing Obeah and Myalism remains in effect. Potential punishment for practicing Obeah and Myalism includes imprisonment of up to 12 months. The government, however, does not in practice enforce this law.

Registration with the government is not mandatory for religious groups, but groups, including churches or congregations, need to incorporate to gain benefits, including the ability to hold land, enter into legal disputes as organizations, and allow their clergy to visit prisoners. Groups seeking incorporated status are

required to apply to the Companies Office of Jamaica (Companies Office), an executive agency. The application comprises a standard form and a fee of 24,500 Jamaican dollars (\$163). Nongovernmental organizations register through the same form and fee structure. Groups incorporated through this process must subsequently submit annual reports and financial statements to the Companies Office.

Alternatively, religious groups may petition parliament to be incorporated by parliamentary act. Such groups receive similar benefits to those incorporating through the Companies Office, but parliament does not require annual reports or regulate the organizations it incorporates.

Regardless of incorporation status, religious groups seeking tax-exempt status must register as charities. To be considered a charity, an organization must apply either to the Department of Co-operatives and Friendly Societies, within the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, Agriculture, and Fisheries, or to the Companies Office. Once registered, groups also submit their registration to the Jamaica Customs Agency within the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service and apply to Tax Administration Jamaica to be considered for tax-free status.

The constitution states religious groups have the right to provide religious instruction to members of their communities.

The law requires school administrators to adhere to several practices regarding the teaching of religion. No individual may be required to participate in religious observances contrary to his or her beliefs. The public school curriculum includes nondenominational religious education, which focuses on the historical role of religion in society and philosophical thought and includes group visits to Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu houses of worship. Students may not opt out of religious education, but collective religious worship during school hours is optional. The law permits homeschooling.

Churches operate several private schools. Churches also operate several public schools, for which they receive funding from the government and must abide by Ministry of Education, Youth, and Information rules. Regulations mandate that religious schools receiving public funding must admit students of all faiths and adhere to the ministry's standards. Religious schools are not subject to any

special restrictions; they do not receive special treatment from the government based on their religious or denominational affiliation. Most religious schools are affiliated with Catholic or Protestant churches. The Islamic Council of Jamaica operates several schools.

Foreign religious workers, regardless of affiliation, who visit the country to work with a religious organization, must obtain a visa and a work permit from the Ministry of Labor and Social Security.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In February, the DPP declined to file charges against a police officer accused of forcibly cutting a Rastafarian woman's locs in jail after her arrest in 2021. The DPP, in concert with the Independent Commission of Investigations, which investigated the case, ruled that there was insufficient evidence to pursue criminal charges in the incident. Rastafarian groups protested the ruling, and in April, the Office of the Public Defender recommended the government compensate the victim, Nzinga King, for violations of her constitutional rights. At year's end, King had not received any compensation.

Advocacy and religious groups noted the case's symbolic representation and potential impact on cultural identity and religious expression. Rastafarian religious groups in particular said the case underscored misconceptions about the health and cleanliness of people who wear their hair in locs.

Rastafarians continued to report discrimination at some workplaces and against their children at schools, mostly in rural areas. A couple continued their appeal of a 2020 Supreme Court ruling that a primary school was justified in barring their child from attending unless she cut her locs, based on her lack of self-declaration as a Rastafarian. Other Rastafarians also reported discrimination from school administrators based on their hairstyle. According to a media outlet, Rastafarian elder Lewis Brown stated, "The Ministry of Education should create a policy document that addresses the issue of discrimination in all schools, especially against the Rastafari, including in relation to the wearing of dreadlocks, vaccinations, religious education, and holidays. Such a policy would relieve principals and school boards of the burden of making arbitrary decisions." He

also stated the Ministry of Labor should create a policy to address discrimination in the workplace.

The JDF generally continued to refuse acceptance of Rastafarians into its ranks. The JDF previously noted it did not discriminate based on religion or denomination, but it stated that the force's strict codes of conduct regarding hair length and the prohibition of marijuana use among its members were the obstacles to Rastafarian participation in the force.

Most religious leaders remained publicly opposed to abortion, as several legislators spoke out in favor of its legalization.

Seventh-day Adventists continued to report that their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays caused them difficulties. Seventh-day Adventists continued to report facing challenges with employment due to their inability to work on Saturday.

The government hosted the National Interfaith Thanksgiving Service at the University of the West Indies Mona Chapel on October 16. Representatives from a range of religious groups, including Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, and Rastafarian communities, participated in the service alongside senior government officials.

According to media reports, during the year, the government continued to compensate individuals from a trust fund it established in 2017 for victims of the 1963 Coral Gardens incident in which eight persons were killed and hundreds injured in clashes between a Rastafarian farming community and security forces outside Montego Bay. Rastafarian leaders advocated further steps by the government to account for past and present discrimination against the Rastafarian community, including assistance to develop a monument or museum for the preservation of their culture.

According to media reports, school officials dismissed classes early at Oberlin High School in St. Andrew Parish on October 26 after several students were reported writhing on the ground and speaking in tongues following a devotional message by one of their teachers. Several of the students who fell to the ground received care from the school nurse, and others underwent further evaluation at local

medical facilities. Many did not return to school for several days after the incident. Media reported that officials suspended large-scale devotional exercises at the school, and Minister for Education and Youth Fayval Williams announced an investigation of the incident. In a public statement, the Association of Christian Communicators and Media urged the government not to take measures against devotional services in schools.

On April 21, Olivia Grange, Minister for Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport attended celebrations of Grounation Day, an important Rastafarian holy day. In remarks at the event, Grange stated, “Today, Jamaica is proud of the contribution of Rastafari to the national cultural image at home and abroad.” In October, Grange welcomed the President of the Crown Council of Ethiopia, Prince Ermias Selassie, for National Heritage Week events that included meetings with the Rastafarian community. During the visit, Minister Grange highlighted the cultural contributions of the Rastafarian community. Some Rastafarian community leaders voiced objections, however, stating the government planned the visit without consulting them.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Rastafarians continued to report wider societal acceptance, despite continued negative stereotyping and stigma associated with their wearing locs and smoking marijuana.

Christian, Jewish, and Islamic groups continued to state that society was tolerant of religious diversity, citing their ongoing involvement, along with other faiths, in the Jamaica Council for Interfaith Fellowship. The interfaith council included representatives from the Rastafari Innity Council, Sanatan Dharma Mandir United Church, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is, United Congregation of Israelites, Islamic Council, and Soka Gakkai International. In October, the council helped organize a National Heritage Week interfaith service.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) individuals continued to report negative attitudes and discrimination from some religious groups. Same sex relations continued to be criminalized, with the support of some religious groups. Some Rastafarian community members objected to the

efforts of other groups to promote tolerance for the LGBTQI+ community. According to social media, Jeffrey Shuttleworth, the leader of Tarrant Baptist Church, urged local teachers to refrain from taking jobs overseas so they could remain in the country to guard children against ideas such as marriage equality or the recognition of more than two genders. In November, Anglican Bishop of Kingston Reverend Garth Minott participated in a panel following the screening of a film promoting LGBTQI+ tolerance.

Local media outlets continued to provide a forum for extensive coverage and open dialogue on religious matters through radio and television shows, as well as in opinion pages and letters to the editor in newspapers such as the *Gleaner* and the *Jamaica Observer*. Topics included the intersection of LGBTQI+ rights with religion, the status of regulation of churches, religion's role in society and education, and the connection between religion and politics.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged with officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, the Ministry of Culture, Gender, Entertainment and Sport, the Ministry of National Security, the JCF, and the JDF to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including the rights and treatment of vulnerable individuals by religious groups.

Embassy officials also met with and encouraged dialogue among leaders of religious groups, including Christians, Muslims, and Rastafarians, on the importance of religious tolerance, social inclusion, and freedom of expression and assembly in relation to religious freedom. Embassy officials met with Rastafarian leaders and discussed issues that their community faced related to religious freedom, including discrimination in schools against their children, employment rights, religious use of marijuana, and wearing of locs, as well as respective and differing views regarding LGBTQI+ rights in the country. Embassy officials also engaged faith-based organizations to promote violence prevention among youth, and rural development. The Ambassador incorporated faith-based organizations into discussions with other civil society groups on gender relations and community violence. The embassy also used social media posts to recognize International Holocaust Remembrance Day and to promote religious tolerance and diversity.